

to cause a hundred veils to fall each moment

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by [middlemarch](#)

Summary

Alina had been abandoned so many times without any recourse. Today must be different.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

“You could have made me your equal. Instead, you made me this,” Alina said. Where had he gone, the Aleksander who took her riding, who cast wishes into a fountain? Who asked *are you sure?* rather than taking away her breath with another of his kisses—who promised to come back to her? Who had come back to find her gone and had sought her unceasingly.

He was quiet, as if he waited for her to say something else. Something even more true.

“You don’t care who suffers, as long as you win,” Alina said, crossing her hands at the base of her throat where the collar lay restive against her clavicle. Aleksander gave her a long look, one she recognized was not anger but betrayal. Hopelessness.

“Fine,” he said. “Make me your villain.” Each word was precise, soft, as defined as a shadow could never be, as light never was. The moment was between them and then he ended it, turning away, walking away from her. Alina held her breath and then her lips parted; she felt the sway of the black silk tassel at the back of her head measuring the seconds. She had no one to advise her but herself, but she was a woman who had burned maps and cut a sickle into her own palm.

“Marie died,” she said. He stopped but didn’t turn around. “Aleksander—she died and Alexei and the other mapmakers who came with me, who came because of me and I don’t know how to bear it, what I did to them—”

“You did nothing to them,” he said, still without facing her, but she saw the change in his posture, the slope of his broad shoulders beneath the stiff kefta. “Their deaths aren’t your fault, their suffering isn’t yours to carry.”

“I don’t agree,” she said. “They come to me in the night, they are the kindest ghosts and I know I’m to blame—”

“They died because you are Grisha. Because there will always be Grisha and there are always people who want to destroy us, but painfully few who want to give Grisha a safe harbor,” he said. “Even you, you asked me if someone else could take your power, if someone else could be the one to find the way—I made the necklace for you because you asked to be released and I couldn’t refuse you. I couldn’t abandon my people when there was something else I could do to protect them.”

“I didn’t want this,” she said, taking one step closer to him, seeing how he didn’t move at all. She meant the distance between them, when she once been held in his arms, his breath in her lungs, his shadow making her light shine like mid-summer, their souls’ lust become luster. She meant the necklace he gave as a gift that she took as a fetter, she meant becoming extraordinary and still feeling alone, instead of insignificant and ignored. She meant having a destiny instead of a journey, of knowing it would be a very long time before her eternity caught up to his.

“I wanted to give you something,” he said. “When I was a boy, my friends, ones I thought of as you do your Malyen, I trusted them and they tried to kill me for my bones. The power they

could take from me, the protection. My mother told me she'd warned me, I'd been stupid, a foolish little boy—"

Alina heard Baghra's sharp voice *you foolish little girl*, the diminishment, the humiliation. She heard the reflection of Baghra's anger in Aleksander's tone, the lack of any consolation. *My mother*, he said, not Baghra. My mother, he said, and she heard how he had called out *Madraya* as Baghra walked away.

"It hurts," she said, touching her throat again where the stag's antlers lay just beneath her skin, her skin inflamed, raw, the weight of power. She rested her hands across her beating heart, which longed for him and ached to be known, to know him truly, the little boy, the leader, the man who had never been allowed to be himself. Had never been allowed to be anyone else—a scholar or an artist, a mystic, an observer of the heavens. A brother, a husband, a father. "Aleksander, if I came to you, would you come to me?"

"If you wanted me, *moya dusha*, I would cross every sea, no matter how wide, no matter what lay beneath the waters," he said.

She took another step towards him and let her hands fall without reaching out for him. She cast the smallest sfera with each, the light the size of a pearl, with a pearl's luminescence, a pearl's central, critical flaw. He had said he would cross every sea, but would he cross the room? His eyes were dark and then bright with tears. And then he was holding her two hands in his, the sfera warm in their shared grasp.

"I could not make you my equal, Alinochka," he said. "How could I make you what you already are?"

"Are you sure?" she asked, making him remember when he had said the same words, how eager she had been for him. The terrible relief of their shared desire, their joyful welcome of their beloved. Asking him what they could become if he trusted her with his true self, if she let him know all her questions, her dreams, her smallness.

"No matter what lies beneath the waters," he repeated. He let go of her right hand and touched the ridge of the bone at her neck, sent his darkness after; the necklace settled against her, as light as the delicate tassel brushing the bare nape of her neck. He stroked his finger along her collarbone and up against the line of her neck, across her parted lips. "Make me yours," he said and she reached up to draw his head down to her as she had when she first kissed him but this time she kept her eyes open to watch him. To be seen by him as she parted her lips for him, as she tasted his sweetness, his bitterness, his tears. To feel the beginning of mending within herself and him and somehow, distantly, within the Volcra, as they dropped from the skies and slept, their wings once again becoming hands.

End Notes

Title from Rumi.

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